Secretary Michael Chertoff's Speech at the 17th Annual Executive Officer Program Symposium--June 1, 2005

Thank you for that very nice introduction. I liked the music when I came in. I think from now on when I speak I am going to have that music…maybe we should try Rocky next time, I can run up the steps.

It's terrific to be with you here today. I want to thank Dave Paulison for that introduction and for his service as Fire Administrator and also Charlie Dickenson as Deputy Fire Administrator and of course I want to thank you for coming here this morning to hear me talk to you instead of being outside playing golf in this great weather.

You are really the elite of first responders and as graduates of the Executive Fire Officer Program you are really leaders in our Nation's fire service and I come here really to pay tribute to you. This symposium and everything that is done up here I think provide excellent opportunities to exchange knowledge, information, and ideas and to develop enhanced leadership skills, and I think one thing we know about managing any incident, in addition to the training with the respect of using the equipment and the physical skills that individual responders need, it's leadership and management in a crisis situation that often makes the difference between success and failure, life and death. So it is very valuable to share with you the kind of expertise that this Fire Administration is able to bring to the table but also to get from you the benefit of your own experiences and wisdom as we continually try to improve ourselves and I thought what I would do is try and share a few thoughts from my perspective as Secretary of DHS not only about our relationship with the Fire Service and Fire Personnel all over the country but more generally what our approach is to the issue of Homeland Security.

I of course knew before I came to the Department of Homeland Security how critical the Fire Services are to our Homeland Security. I was in Washington on 9/11, actually at the FBI Headquarters dealing with the incident there in the days and weeks after the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, but of course I knew many people who were in and around the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on the days of those events and I still have a very vivid recollection of the courage, the skill, the experience, and the contribution made by Fire Personnel on the scene of both of those tragedies on that day, and I think the Fire Service and Fire Personnel became National icons and they became National heroes as a result of that.

Of course they always were heroes in home towns and communities and cities large and small but I think from a National standpoint people began to look at Fire Personnel really as heroes in the way that our service personnel are in Afghanistan and Iraq and I believe the public still shares that appreciation for what you do and has it very much in all of our minds when we deal with the challenges that you face protecting us from fires and other similar types of disaster.

The fact of the matter is the country has undergone a transformation after September 11th. That doesn't mean we are under a constant state of agitation but it does mean we are under an obligation to keep ourselves prepared, and I know preparedness is something that is very much a

part of the work that you do and the leadership that you bring in your communities and in your responder organizations.

The fact of the matter is the threat we have now, in addition to the traditional threats that we have, is of a determined enemy, a network, that wants to continue to visit upon us in this country, and in fact all over the world, as much damage and as much death as they can possibly deal to us. They are motivated by beliefs that we cannot fully understand or appreciate, but that put them in a position and give them the kind of intent to carry out acts that will, if allowed to go unchecked, cause tremendous damage to our country and our loved ones.

And of course our strategy in dealing with this is a layered approach. We prevent, we protect, but we also prepare and respond and we understand that with respect to a lot of these threats the challenge and the mitigation is very much as important as the prevention. In other words, the consequences of an act of terror would be measured largely by the kind of preparedness and the kind of response we are able to bring into play to mitigate the harm and if you want to talk about it as victory or defeat the victory will lie in some instances in the response so you are in that sense very much on the front lines of the war against terror.

Now we have done some things in the wake of 9/11 to increase our ability to be nimble and be skilled in addressing the question of incident management and response. We've created and rolled out our National Response Plan and our National Incident Management System. For the first time we have a single National plan that coordinates incident management among Federal, State, and local emergency management professionals. The National Response Plan creates clearer lines of communication, command, and control as well as National standards for first responder training and equipment. We have also released an Interim National Preparedness Goal to facilitate the implementation of the response plan and the incident management system to expand regional collaboration and to implement our National infrastructure protection plan. What does this all boil down to?

You understand that in a moment of crisis one of the most important things is to have clear command and control and authority so we don't bump into each other. We have 50 different States, hundreds of thousands of jurisdictions, ranging from tribes to small towns to big cities. We can't predict where an incident will occur. What these plans allow us to do is have a process in place and a commonality of language and approach that means anywhere in the country, whether we have small scale, or large scale, or even a National scale, we know where we go, how we connect, how we control, and how we coordinate.

Of course my responsibility as Secretary of Homeland Security in incidents of a certain size will be to play a role myself in the incident management structure and the response plan. One thing I hope to do actually, and I said to the Administrator, is come out at some point hopefully in the next few months and actually go through and sit through half a day or so of your training in incident response and incident management so I can see from your perspective how that should operate.

We've done some other things as well. Our assistance to firefighter grants has totaled more than two billion dollars since September 11th and these grants help you to prepare for a variety of

circumstances with new tools, training, and equipment. We have enhanced communication among first responders. We've issued new guidelines for communications interoperability and we have established the Homeland Security information network, which is a conduit through which State and local partners of DHS can share information and experience among each other online.

We are also conducting something called the second-stage review, which is to take stock after 2 years of where the department is, recognizing that it was stood up from scratch, and see where we have successfully achieved our mission and where we have not achieved the mission, identify the gaps, and then to figure out what we need to do to align our structures and our operations to be more efficient in order to plug the gaps and get to where our objectives are. This is meant to be a mission-oriented focus meaning, we're not going to make the decisions here based on the components, individual metrics about how they are doing, but we are going to ask a simple question: Have we accomplished the job that we have set out to do? And when we haven't accomplished the job we are going to ask what is the shortfall and then we are going to fix the shortfall by making the organization and the operations fit the mission rather than defining the mission based on what our existing organizations are. And I think that is going to be a useful approach in terms of taking us to the next level of where we need to be across the spectrum of our response abilities.

What is our philosophy? Our philosophy is one that will be familiar to you: risk management, and what risk management means is something you know. We are not going to be able to protect everybody in every place at every moment against everything and if we were to promise that to the American people we would be making a false promise and we would be raising expectations in an unrealistic way. What we can do is what you do and we all do in our daily lives: we can manage the risk and we can prioritize, we can balance and optimize the steps we take, balancing the benefits gained against the costs we incur. We have a very straightforward formula for doing this, we look at consequence, we look at vulnerability, and we look at threat and we think with those three analytical points, we can take a look at the entirety of what our threat and risk picture is and make judgments about where we ought to put our efforts in a priority basis.

Frankly, that recognizes that this isn't a Federal government responsibility, this is a shared responsibility this is a network: much as the terrorists have a network, we have a network. It is network of Federal, State, local, and private actors. We all have to play our role because no one of us has the resources or the expertise to execute the responsibility just by ourselves.

So, what we want to come forward out of this second-stage review is a sense of how we further develop our network and develop our partnership under this risk management philosophy. I think you will see as we start to enact some of these changes that will emerge out of this second-stage review, we have listened to you. I talked with people in the Fire Services, we have talked with a lot of other people in the State and local government, as well as our Federal Stakeholders, and I think you will see proposals coming out that we hope will address some of the concerns and some of the advice that we have gotten from you and your peers over the years.

As fire service leaders, your job is to continue to be the best at protecting your communities and at saving lives. As we move into the new world of Homeland Security, which will be with us for

the foreseeable future, taking a leadership role in preparedness is a natural progression for your skills. Your participation in this symposium demonstrates that you have the leadership potential to make a difference in this task. I want to thank you for the additional challenges you have taken on since September 11th; I want to thank you for your willingness to meet these new challenges and to carry the burden of dealing with them forward; and I would like to thank you for your past, current, and future contributions to our Nation's security. Thank you very much.

Now speaking about risk, I think I will "risk" a few questions before I have to go back down to Washington, but keep the consequences on the low side if you will. So questions…

Sir, we have heard comments that the Homeland Security Advisory System may be re-looked at because of possible changes or even individual interest points—is there anything actually going on?

That is a very good question. Let me make a couple of points. First of all, we, DHS, does not "own" the system; it is actually an administration-wide system. That being said, we have said that one of the things we need to take a look at is the advisory system and see if it needs adjusted in some way. I will give you my kind of 2-second perspective on this, but we are very interested in what you have to say.

For better or for worse, we have now built a system among the professionals that is geared to the existing advisory system. When we move from the yellow to orange for example, in States and localities, and in the private sector, there are a series of things that come into play that are prepackaged and we are already prepared for. There would be costs involved in changing that system from a professional standpoint because we have already built upon it. There is a public element as well.

As I remember it initially, we did not make these kinds of changes public, but they become public very quickly when people ran out in front of the cameras and then gave their own spin on what was going on. There was a public outcry about how they weren't being told what was going on, they were being kept in the dark. So, the original motivation for making the system public was to address that concern. Whether we have adequately managed the public communications aspect of this I think is an interesting question, and it is something I have asked and I think we are going to look at. Whether it means our presentation has to be different or the way we publicize it has to be different. I think those are things we are looking at.

I think we are interested, frankly, in what you have to say about this, whether you think there are things we ought to be doing differently. I understand that there is always a criticism that we have to be more specific about the nature of the threat, and I will tell you that uniformally across the board everybody agrees with that. Where we can be specific, where it is a particular area, or particular type of infrastructure, we do want to be specific about it. I think when we had the alerts last summer, with respect to the northeast, we were able to be specific. Unfortunately sometimes we can't be specific. We get information that is credible and specific enough in terms of its intent to feel that we do have to put an alert out, but we can't give you any more granularity about where it is and what it is. So we understand that there is a frustration level.

I think we need to always make a pretty disciplined judgment about when we raise the level. As our general level of preparedness increases, as our ready state of yellow becomes closer in fact to what used to be orange, my hope is that we will have to do less alerting because we will be in a steady state of preparedness that can address these kinds of issues. What I wanted to do here was not to give you an answer but to give you a sense of the dynamics that are at work as we study this question.

What do you see as the role of the U.S. Fire Administration, in particular the National Fire Academy, in the strategy for equipping responders long-term?

One of the things we are looking at in the second-stage review is generally how do we better deal with the issue of preparedness. I will tell you I think the hardest job we have in the department is preparedness because it is unlike what the government usually does. Actually the Fire Administration is a very good model because it is something that the Fire Administration does do. They do preparedness.

Most of the time big departments of government essentially operate the stuff they own and deal with the people they employ. As I said earlier we really are about a network; our preparedness rests largely in the hands of the responders, which are people like you. What I think we want to do is look at the Fire Administration as part of our expertise at figuring out what is the best thing we can do to help you be prepared.

A large piece of this is planning. When I think about the new hazards, and I don't mean the traditional hazards of fire and things like that, which is what you deal with, but chemical, biological, and radiological. A lot of what we need to do is planning. We need to have a very specifically vague set of plans about what the characteristics of these hazards are and how you are going to respond to those. We need to make sure we are doing the kind of planning and the kind of educating in rolling those plans out that will be user-friendly to you. I think that is where the Fire Administration and its expertise is going to be very important in how we structure our preparedness.

Likewise, when you look at our preparedness goals, which will be going for the template for what we do in terms of giving aid. What we have to be focused on here is where we can give aid that gives people the power to achieve the specific capabilities they need in order to be prepared for all the hazards that they face.

Again I think that the Fire Administration has a lot of experience, which we will draw upon in putting together our preparedness goals and moving forward with them. So I see the Fire Administration as the expertise of real hands-on fire management as an integral part of our overall strategy. And I do want to emphasize that we take an all-hazards approach to this; you need to be prepared for all hazards and I view, frankly, that as something as synergy.

In other words, there is an element of training that you can't duplicate except in real life and that is panic and the unexpected, and I think a General once said, "The battle plan starts to degrade

the minute the first shot is fired." Recognizing the kind of daily exercise you people get, you firefighters get, and you emergency responders get, every time you confront a hazard, that is an important part of our training for even the most dramatic type of hazards. So we want to continue to build upon that strength with an all-hazards approach and one that leverages upon your daily experience as we look at some of the more devastating types of consequences we worry about.

Thank you for being here today, Mr. Secretary. My question is in reference to the UASI (Urban Area Security Initiative); currently my area does not receive UASI funding. My question is will that funding continue and will it expand to include more cities in the future?

I think a lot of this is directed to Congress. We asked for UASI funding in the budget. As we sit here now, I can't tell you exactly where we are in terms of the appropriations process, and I certainly can't tell you where we will wind up. I want to be straight with you; we are using a risk management formula that means that not every city is going to get money.

What that means is each year we have added more analysis to our rating of cities in terms of, again, consequence, vulnerability, and threat, and we are focused on in some degree concentrating the assistance that we give on where this risk analysis tells us is the most important, the most high-consequence outcomes will be, the greatest vulnerabilities, and frankly the greatest threats because we do have some intelligence about that. I don't know whether any particular cities are going to fall within or without; it is going be driven by other types of factors that are really external.

That is not to say that there aren't other programs available; sometimes there are infrastructure protection programs and certainly, in general, our preparedness and our planning is going to be available to everybody, but I have to be upfront this; is a program that has to operate based upon the disciplined approach I have outlined, which is risk management. The one thing I will tell you is we will be analytically disciplined about it; we'll be transparent; we'll be able to show people how it is we are reaching these conclusions. We are using very sophisticated computer modeling and ever increasing our database, and I hope that the understanding will be that we are doing this in a way that doesn't necessarily make everybody happy but I am not in the business of making everybody happy, I am in the business of getting the country prepared, as are you in your communities. I want to have the dialogue and I want to listen and acknowledge when we make mistakes, but I am going to be upfront in saying we aren't going to make everyone happy.

Thank you very much!